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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000401

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SUBJECT: SAG PUNISHES POPULAR CONSERVATIVE CLERIC FOR
REACHING OUT TO SUFIS

REF: A. 05 JEDDAH 2479

[B](#). 05 JEDDAH 3555

[C](#). 05 JEDDAH 4939

[D](#). JEDDAH 329

Classified By: Acting Consul General Hector Morales for reasons
1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY. Jeddah sheikh Abdullah Fadaaq continues to hold a weekly Sufi majlis, despite SAG efforts last year to shut it down. In late April, the popular conservative Saudi cleric Salman al-Odah attended the majlis, after which the Ministry of Islamic Affairs barred him from participating in a ceremony honoring students for Quranic memorization. The SAG's inconsistent dealings with Fadaaq's majlis, together with its retributive action against al-Odah, likely reflect varying levels of success of the Saudi religious establishment in influencing the SAG to crack down on Islamic practices other than those sanctioned by Wahhabi clerics. END SUMMARY.

FADAAQ CONTINUING TO HOLD SUFI MAJLIS

[2](#). (C) Sheikh Abdullah Fadaaq holds a majlis in his Jeddah home on Sunday evenings, where he and his students and guests come together socially and to pray and study the Quran. The majlis is controversial among the Saudi religious establishment because of its Sufi perspective and because it is attended by both men and women (though in separate rooms). Fadaaq, a liberal, is often at odds with the religious establishment. He has called for official recognition in the Kingdom of the four principal schools of Islamic jurisprudence, rather than solely the strict, Wahhabi-sanctioned Hanbali school; and he frequently travels throughout the Middle East to attend Islamic conferences, appears on television, and writes articles on religious topics, including an article recently published in the pan-Arab newspaper al-Hayat arguing against punishment by death for converts to Islam who subsequently leave the faith. (NOTE. Fadaaq invited ConGenOff, a non-Muslim, to attend his next majlis, an indication of his openness relative to mainstream Saudi clerics. END NOTE.)

[3](#). (C) In June 2005, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) ordered Fadaaq to shut down his majlis (reftel A). The MOI claimed Fadaaq had failed to obtain SAG permission before making a TV appearance, but Fadaaq believes the religious establishment was responsible for the move, in what he said was demonstration of the power of Wahhabi extremists within the establishment and their influence over the SAG. After a September 2005 meeting with Interior Minister Prince Nayif, Fadaaq was permitted to resume the majlis (reftel B). In

November 2005, Crown Prince Sultan apparently ordered Fadaaq to shut down the majlis permanently (reftel C). Nevertheless, Fadaaq has continued to hold the majlis since then without any SAG interference. "Sometimes the religious authorities bother us, and sometimes they don't", he said. "You never know what they'll do."

CONSERVATIVE CLERIC'S ATTENDANCE AT MAJLIS DRAWS SAG
RETRIBUTION

¶4. (C) Sheikh Salman al-Odah, one of the most popular clerics in Saudi Arabia (reftel D), attended Fadaaq's majlis in late April. Al-Odah attended as a normal guest, though Fadaaq did let him address the majlis for a few minutes. Al-Odah, who was identified in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing trial as Osama bin Laden's "spiritual advisor" and who reportedly issued a 2001 fatwa justifying and advocating suicide bombings, has, according to Fadaaq, lately been reaching out to moderate and liberal clerics. Fadaaq attributed al-Odah's recent, public conversion to moderate Islam to his imprisonment in the 1990s for criticizing the Saudi regime. "He got out of prison," Fadaaq said, "and became a moderate."

¶5. (C) Many of al-Odah's longtime followers have been less than pleased with the change. Fadaaq said both he and al-Odah received death threats on various Islamist websites following al-Odah's attendance at the majlis. Websurfing extremists were not the only ones displeased with al-Odah's reaching out to the Sufi cleric, though. Al-Odah had been slated to speak at a ceremony in Riyadh to honor students who had excelled at memorizing the Quran, but, according to Fadaaq, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs subsequently barred al-Odah from participating in the ceremony.

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¶6. (C) COMMENT. The SAG's schizophrenic dealings with Fadaaq's majlis, together with its retributive action against al-Odah, likely reflect varying levels of success of the religious establishment in influencing the SAG to crack down on Saudis who follow non-Hanbali schools of thought. In this respect, it may be noteworthy that Fadaaq, who has been permitted to continue holding his Sufi majlis, comes from the Hejaz, where Islamic practice has historically been diverse, whereas al-Odah, who was punished merely for attending the majlis, comes from the Wahhabi heartland of Qassim in the Nejd. END COMMENT.

Morales